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Traitors deserve stiff punishment

By CARL T. ROWAN

THE U.S. has been severely damaged from the standpoint of military security by the record number of spy penetrations revealed in 1985. As more cases of treasonous behavior are uncovered, we may find them causing serious threats to personal liberty within this country.

America's intelligence agencies and the military services will never tell the truth publicly about how much damage spies have done. But you can make a judgment that is frightening enough if you will remember that:

- The John A. Walker Jr. spy ring gave the Soviet Union the Navy's most sensitive codes and compromised the most modern U.S. cryptographic equipment. The Soviets probably got invaluable aid in keeping track of U.S. nuclear submarines.

- Former CIA analyst and linguist Larry Wu Tai Chin has, over 20 years, given China a mind-boggling array of U.S. documents classified top secret and higher. Although he went to Hong Kong and other cities to pass along U.S. secrets, Chin was undetected as a CIA "mole" for two decades. He compromised almost every aspect of U.S. policy in the Far East.

- Ronald W. Pelton, a former employe of the ultra-secret National Security Agency, sold the Soviet Union information about the multi-million-dollar NSA program to break Soviet codes, intercept Soviet telephone calls, cables and other messages, and to eavesdrop electronically on Soviet embassies and facilities all over the world. He surely helped the Soviets to develop counter-measures.

The damage done by the known spies can be counted in billions of dollars and a lot more lives of Americans and America's friends operating abroad.

We must not swallow whole the suggestions that a record number of spies has been caught in 1985 because our security procedures are tighter and our counterespionage efforts are better. In the Walker case we "got lucky" when a disgruntled wife let a mangy cat out of the bag.

Pelton and some others were fingered by Soviet KGB officer Vitaly Yurchenko, the defector-for-awhile. There aren't enough angry ex-wives and defectors around to make me doubt that a lot of people like Chin are still in our government and military, likely to get away with selling out America for 20 years.

We will never stop it as long as Americans with access to vital secrets feel that they can take a million dollars or so from a hostile government (or friendly one, as in the case of Israel and Jonathan Jay Pollard) for betraying America because the price of getting caught will be puny compared with the magnitude of the crime and the amount of money to be gained.

The laws ought to stipulate that upon conviction, a John Walker or Larry Chin is to be imprisoned for life, without possible parole, and the federal government is to seize all his money and property. That ought to be the law, period — and no plea bargaining and hawking about a lighter sentence in exchange for telling what was given away, or for fingering

another alleged spy.

The danger, though, is that in anger and frustration the government will impose shotgun regulations and scattershot draconian measures against all manner of employes and citizens.

Federal gumshoes could go into an orgy of impositions of lie detector tests. Anyone living beyond what seems to be his or her means could have bank accounts looked at secretly. Tapping telephones could become a sort of new American lottery. Neighbors could start looking under each other's beds again.

Let's hope that we can make the penalties for spying tough enough, and our counterespionage efforts effective enough, so we won't need to lay on new batches of Soviet-style police state measures. But you can be sure that espionage is such a threat to America that someone is going to do something drastic.